

tokyo journal

If you thought going to *Dungeons & Dragons* meetings looking like a hobbit was mad, or decking yourself out as Spock for a Trek fest a bit silly, then you won't believe the people who dress up as their favourite game characters. Martyn Williams investigates

When Microsoft launched its Xbox console over here in late February, anyone walking through early morning Tokyo would not have been surprised to see the expected queues of people, TV cameras and perhaps even Bill Gates himself – but teens in skimpy costumes posing as characters from video games? And, before you ask, these weren't people hired by Microsoft. In Tokyo's gadget heaven of Akihabara, retailers organised a 'cos-play' contest to attract attention away from the software giant's official launch taking place across town in the much trendier Shibuya.

The dressing-up Xbox

Cos-play, to anyone that doesn't know (which is probably just about anyone that has never lived in Japan) is short for costume play – a hobby in which otherwise sane individuals dress up as their favourite cartoon or video game character. And we are not talking Bugs Bunny here.

For the Xbox launch, characters from the *Dead or Alive* computer game – the latest version of which is available for the Xbox – were most common, but cos-players don't just come out of the woodwork for game console launches. Travel to the annual Tokyo Game Show, or indeed any exhibition that involves computer games or animation characters, and you'll find scores of these unmissable fancy dress fanatics.

These exhibitionists also love to be photographed and it's not uncommon to see a line of eager young men – all unmistakably single – queuing up to take pictures. At the Tokyo Game Show, things have got so out-of-hand that the organisers have special changing areas for cos-players (well, you didn't think they travelled on the train like that, did you?) and areas reserved for them and the many attendant photographers.

Dating game

The games themselves are also becoming increasingly life-like. A new genre – simulation titles – has appeared in the last few years, with titles on offer covering everyday

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situations, usually centred around love or, in the case of adult games, sex.

One of the most popular titles is *Tokimeki Memorial* by Konami. The game is basically a simulation of the world of high school dating where you, the main character, have to interact with, chat to and, hopefully, date your choice of 10 schoolgirls that make up the other main characters. Do it right and on graduation day she will be yours forever. Do it wrong and she'll bad mouth you behind your back and no one will like you.

Tokimeki Memorial is immensely popular and is already in its third version, but don't go searching for it in a computer store near you. Konami has only sold it in Japan and a handful of Asian countries. The reason?

"Would you want a game like this in Europe?" asked Yukako Hamaguchi of Konami, to which I had to reply, "Well, not me personally."

"So there you go. That's why we don't sell it," she said.

Intelligent conversation?

Success isn't limited to computer games either. A new breed of phone-based simulations use AI (artificial intelligence) to make it much more like you are having a conversation with a 'real' girl. NTT DoCoMo's 'Mail de Girl' service costs around £1.20 a month on i-mode and users get a choice of girls with whom to make friends. The company also promises you a 'partner of your own'. Feel like you're missing out? We didn't think so. ■

